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# WILLIAM COBBETT.

IN the second year of George III.'s reign—when Edmund Burke was editing the *Annual Register* at a salary of L.50 a year—when Dr Johnson's friends were busily at work urging ministers to obtain a pension for him from the amiable young monarch—when Horace Walpole was entertaining his numerous correspondents with that delightful gossip about the new court and young Queen Charlotte, which, after nearly a century, still preserves its charm—when William Pitt was learning the alphabet, and Charles James Fox was making Latin verses at Eton, little dreaming of the important part which he and his young rival were destined to play in the world's history—in the spring of that year (1762), in a small cottage in the town of Farnham, in Surrey, William Cobbett, one of the most remarkable self-taught men of whom England can boast,

first saw the light. 'With respect to my ancestors,' he says in his *Adventures of Peter Porcupine*, 'I shall go no further back than my grandfather; and for this plain reason—that I never heard talk of any prior to him. He was a day-labourer; and I have heard my father say, that he worked for one farmer from the day of his marriage to that of his death—upwards of forty years. He died before I was born; but I have often slept beneath the same roof that had sheltered him, and where his widow dwelt for several years after his death. It was a little thatched cottage, with a garden before the door. It had but two windows—a damson-tree shaded one, and a clump of filberts the other. Here I and my brothers went every Christmas and Whitsuntide to spend a week or two, and torment the poor old woman with our noise and dilapidations. She used to give us milk and bread for breakfast, an apple-pudding for our dinner, and a piece of bread and cheese for supper. Her fire was made of turf, cut from the neighbouring heath, and her evening light was a rush dipped in grease.

'My father, when I was born, was a farmer. The reader will easily believe, from the poverty of his parents, that he had received no very brilliant education; he was, however, learned for a man in his rank of life. When a little boy, he drove the plough for twopence a day; and these, his earnings, were appropriated to the expenses of an evening-school. What a village schoolmaster could be expected to teach, he had learned; and had, besides, considerably improved himself in several branches of the mathematics. He understood land-surveying well, and was often chosen to draw the plans of disputed territory; in short, he had the reputation of possessing experience and understanding, which never fails in England to give a man in a country place some little weight with his neighbours. He was honest, industrious, and frugal; it was not, therefore, wonderful that he should be situated in a good farm, and happy in a wife of his own rank, like him beloved and respected.

'A father like ours, it will be readily supposed, did not suffer us to eat the bread of idleness. I do not remember the time when I did not earn my living. My first occupation was driving the small birds from the turnip-seed, and the rooks from the pease. When I first trudged a field, with my wooden bottle and my satchel swung over my shoulders, I was hardly able to climb the gates and stiles; and at the close of the day, to reach home was a task of infinite difficulty. My next employment was weeding wheat, and leading a single horse at harrowing barley. Hoeing pease followed; and hence I arrived at the honour of joining the reapers in harvest, driving the team, and holding the plough. We were all of us strong and laborious; and my father used to boast that he had four boys, the eldest of whom was but fifteen years old, who did as much work as any three men in the parish of Farnham. Honest pride, and happy days! I have some faint

recollection of going to school to an old woman, who, I believe, did not succeed in learning me my letters. In the winter evenings, my father learned us all to read and write, and gave us a pretty tolerable knowledge of arithmetic. Grammar he did not perfectly understand himself, and therefore his endeavours to learn us that necessarily failed; for though he thought he understood it, and though he made us get the rules by heart, we learned nothing at all of the principles.

'Our religion was that of the Church of England, to which I have ever remained attached; the more so, perhaps, as it bears the name of my country. As to politics, we were like the rest of the country-people in England; that is to say, we neither knew nor thought anything about the matter. The shouts of victory, or the murmurs at a defeat, would now and then break in upon our tranquillity for a moment; but I do not remember ever having seen a newspaper in the house; and, most certainly, that privation did not render us less industrious, happy, or free. After, however, the American war had continued for some time, and the cause and nature of it began to be understood, or rather misunderstood, by the lower classes of the people in England, we became a little better acquainted with subjects of this kind. It is well known that the people were, as to numbers, nearly equally divided in their opinions concerning that war, and their wishes respecting the result of it. My father was a partisan of the Americans; he used frequently to dispute on the subject with the gardener of a nobleman who lived near us. This was generally done with good-humour over a pot of our best ale; yet the disputants sometimes grew warm, and gave way to language that could not fail to attract our attention. My father was worsted, without doubt, as he had for an antagonist a shrewd and sensible old Scotchman, far his superior in political knowledge; but he pleaded before a partial audience: we thought there was but one wise man in the world, and that that one was our father.'

As he was in no humour, while writing his *Life of Peter Porcupine*, to indulge in much detail regarding the incidents of his boyhood, he skips over the whole of that period in a single sentence. 'It would be as useless as unentertaining,' he says, 'to dwell on the occupations and sports of a country-boy; to lead the reader to fairs, cricket-matches, and hare-hunts.' Under this impression, therefore, he takes a jump forward to 1782, when he must have been twenty years old. Of his early tastes and habits, however—his love of gardening and of a country life, for example, which he always hankered after—we have many delightful reminiscences in almost every one of his books, and not unfrequently even in the midst of some of his most furious articles in the *Political Register*. 'From my very infancy,' he says, in the preface to *A Year's Residence in America*, 'from the age of six years, when I climbed up the side of a steep sand-rock, and there scooped me out a plot four feet square to make me a garden, and

the soil for which I carried up in the bosom of my little blue smock-frock or hunting-shirt, I have never lost one particle of my passion for these healthy and rational and heart-cheering pursuits, in which every day presents something new, in which the spirits are never suffered to flag, and in which industry, skill, and care, are sure to meet with their due reward. I have never, for any eight months together, during my whole life, been without a garden.' This love of gardening, which shews itself in many a part of his writings, especially in the *Rural Rides*, he traces to the home education he had received. He was brought up under a father whose talk was chiefly about his garden and his fields, with regard to which he was famed for his skill and neatness. The character of the district in which he was born and bred must have had also no small influence in strengthening his horticultural tendencies. He never tires of sounding the praises of the hop-gardens of Farnham. The neatest in England, if not in the whole world. 'All there is a garden. The neat culture of the hop extends its influence to the fields round about. Hedges cut with shears, and every other mark of skill and care strike the eye at Farnham, and become fainter and fainter as you go from it in every direction.' His first start from home, at the early age of eleven, as he describes, in the following passage, which occurs in an *Address to the Reformers*, published in 1820, was inspired by a determination to see Kew Gardens, of which he had heard such a description as left him no rest till he had gone and seen that collection of horticultural marvels.

'At eleven years of age, my employment was clipping of box-edgings and weeding beds of flowers in the garden of the Bishop of Winchester, at the castle of Farnham. I had always been fond of beautiful gardens; and a gardener, who had just come from the king's gardens at Kew, gave such a description of them as made me instantly resolve to work in these gardens. The next morning, without saying a word to any one, off I set, with no clothes except those upon my back, and with thirteen half-pence in my pocket. I found that I must go to Richmond, and I accordingly went from place to place inquiring my way thither. A long day—it was in June—brought me to Richmond in the afternoon. Two pennyworth of bread and cheese, and a pennyworth of small-beer, which I had on the road, and a half-penny which I had lost somehow or other, left threepence in my pocket. With this for my whole fortune, I was trudging through Richmond in my blue smock-frock and my red garters tied under my knees, when, staring about me, my eye fell upon a little book in a bookseller's window, on the outside of which was written: "Tale of a Tub; price 3d." The title was so odd that my curiosity was excited. I had the threepence, but then I could have no supper. In I went and got the little book, which I was so impatient to read, that I got over into a field at the upper corner of Kew Garden, where there stood a haystack; on the shady side of this I sat down to read. The book

was so different from anything that I had read before, it was something so new to my mind, that though I could not at all understand some of it, it delighted me beyond description; and it produced what I have always considered a birth of intellect. I read on till it was dark, without any thought about supper or bed. When I could see no longer, I put my little book in my pocket, and tumbled down by the side of the stack, where I slept till the birds in Kew Gardens awaked me in the morning, when off I started to Kew, reading my little book. The singularity of my dress, the simplicity of my manner, my confident and lively air, and, doubtless, his own compassion besides, induced the gardener, who was a Scotchman, to give me victuals, find me a lodging, and set me to work. And it was during the period that I was at Kew, that the present king (George IV.) and two of his brothers laughed at the oddness of my dress, while I was sweeping the grass-plot round the foot of the pagoda. The gardener, seeing me fond of books, lent me some gardening books to read; but these I could not relish after my *Tale of a Tub*, which I carried about with me wherever I went; and when I, at about twenty years old, lost it in a box that fell overboard in the Bay of Fundy, in North America, the loss gave me greater pain than I have ever felt at losing thousands of pounds. This circumstance, trifling as it was, and childish as it may seem to relate it, has always endeared the recollection of Kew to me.'

What a pity that he did not leave us a few more such reminiscences of that period, trifling as he professed to consider them! After this delightful picture of his journey to Kew, we lose sight of him entirely for a number of years. How long he remained in the royal gardens, or how he was received when he went back to Farnham, has never been recorded. The next glimpse we have of young Cobbett is after he has arrived at manhood, in the autumn of 1782.

Having gone to visit a relation who lived in the neighbourhood of Portsmouth, he first beheld the sea from the top of Portsdown, and immediately felt a strong desire to become a sailor. He could never account for this sudden impulse, except on the hypothesis that 'almost all English boys feel the same inclination: it would seem that, like young ducks, instinct leads them to rush on the bosom of the water.' But it was not the view of the ocean alone which had such an electric effect upon young Cobbett. 'The grand fleet was riding at anchor at Spithead. I had heard of the wooden walls of Old England; I had formed my ideas of a ship and of a fleet; but what I now beheld so far surpassed what I had ever been able to form a conception of, that I stood lost between astonishment and admiration. I had heard talk of the glorious deeds of our admirals and sailors, of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and of all those memorable combats that good and true Englishmen never fail to relate to their children about a hundred times a year. The brave Rodney's victories over our natural enemies, the French and

Spaniards, had been the theme of our praise and the burden of our songs.' [This was written in 1796.] 'My heart was inflated with national pride. The sailors were my countrymen, the fleet belonged to my country, and surely I had my part in it, and in all its honours; yet these honours I had not earned. I took to myself a sort of reproach for possessing what I had no right to, and resolved to have a just claim by sharing in the hardships and dangers.'

He arrived at his uncle's late in the evening, full of his seafaring project. He had walked thirty miles that day, and consequently was somewhat tired; but, fatigued as he was, his brain was too busy with the naval panorama he had seen that afternoon to let him fall asleep. No sooner was it daylight, than he rose and walked down to the beach, got into a boat, and in a few minutes was on board the *Pegasus* man-of-war. According to Cobbett's own account, the captain, who had more compassion than is generally met with in men of his profession, tried to persuade him to go home, representing the service as a very toilsome and perilous one; but these arguments made very little impression upon him. He had resolved to become a sailor whatever the toil or danger, and accordingly he made an attempt to get his name enrolled in another vessel. There, also, the captain was unwilling to receive him, and he was forced to wend his way home to Farnham, which he did very reluctantly. He returned once more to the plough, but he was spoiled for a farmer. Previous to his Portsmouth adventure, he had known no other ambition than that of surpassing his brothers in the different labours of the field; but that was all over now. 'I sighed for a sight of the world,' he says. 'The little island of Britain seemed too small a compass for me. The things in which I had taken the most delight were neglected; the singing of the birds grew insipid; and even the heart-cheering cry of the hounds, after which I formerly used to fly from the work, bound o'er the fields, and dash through the brakes and coppices, was heard with the most torpid indifference.' Out of this unfortunate state of mind, the most common mode of escape is to run away from home once more, and this appears to have been the course adopted by Cobbett, a few months after his visit to Portsmouth.

'It was on the 6th of May 1783, that I, like Don Quixote, sallied forth to seek adventures. I was dressed in my holiday clothes, in order to accompany two or three lasses to Guildford Fair. They were to assemble at a house, about three miles from my home, where I was to attend them; but, unfortunately for me, I had to cross the London turnpike-road. The stage-coach had just turned the summit of a hill, and was rattling down towards me at a merry rate. The notion of going to London never entered my mind till this very moment, yet the step was completely determined on before the coach came to the spot where I stood. Up I got, and was in London about nine o'clock in the

evening. It was by mere accident that I had money enough to defray the expenses of this day. Being rigged out for the fair, I had three or four crown and half-crown pieces (which most certainly I did not intend to spend), besides a few shillings and halfpence. This, my little all, which I had been years in amassing, melted away like snow before the sun when touched by the fingers of the innkeepers and their waiters. In short, when I arrived at Ludgate Hill, and had paid my fare, I had but about half-a-crown in my pocket.'

Fortunately for the young adventurer, he had fallen into conversation with one of the passengers on the coach, a hop-merchant from Southwark, who had often dealt with his father at Weyhill. Taking an interest in the friendless youth, he invited him to his house, which he was told to look upon as his home till something would turn up. But before taking any steps to obtain employment for him, he wrote to Cobbett's father, letting him know where his son was, and endeavoured to persuade him to obey his father's order, that he should return home instantly. Cobbett confesses that he would willingly have done so, but for that false pride which, under similar circumstances, so frequently overcomes the sense of duty, and the natural impulse of affection. 'It was the first time I had ever been disobedient,' he says, 'and I have repented of it from that moment to this.' The gentleman who had taken him under his protection, finding that his obstinacy could not be overcome, obtained a situation for him as copying-clerk with a Mr Holland, a solicitor in Gray's Inn, where he passed nearly a year in wretched drudgery, according to his own graphic description.

'No part of my life has been totally unattended with pleasure, except the eight or nine months I passed in Gray's Inn. The office—for so the dungeon where I wrote was called—was so dark that, on cloudy days, we were obliged to burn candle. I worked like a galley-slave from five in the morning till eight or nine at night, and sometimes all night long. How many quarrels have I assisted to foment and perpetuate between those poor innocent fellows, John Doe and Richard Roe! How many times—God forgive me!—have I set them to assault each other with guns, swords, staves, and pitchforks, and then brought them to answer for their misdeeds before our sovereign lord the king, seated in his court of Westminster! When I think of the saids and soforths, and the counts of tautology that I scribbled over—when I think of those sheets of seventy-two words, and those lines two inches apart, my brain turns. Gracious Heaven! if I am doomed to be wretched, bury me beneath Iceland snows, and let me feed on blubber; stretch me under the burning line, and deny me thy propitious dews; nay, if it be thy will, suffocate me with the infected and pestilential air of a democratic club-room; but save me from the desk of an attorney!

'Mr Holland was but little in the chambers himself. He always

went out to dinner, while I was left to be provided for by the laundress, as he called her. Those gentlemen of the law who have resided in the Inns of Court in London, know very well what a laundress means. Ours was, I believe, the oldest and ugliest of the sisterhood. She had age and experience enough to be lady-abbess of all the nuns in all the convents of Irish Town. It would be wronging the Witch of Endor to compare her to this hag, who was the only creature that deigned to enter into conversation with me. All except the name, I was in prison, and this weird sister was my keeper. Our chambers were to me what the subterraneous cavern was to Gil Blas: his description of the Dame Leonarda exactly suited my laundress; nor were the professions, or rather the practice, of our master altogether dissimilar.'

It was not surprising that he should have at last made up his mind to escape from a mode of life which must have been purgatory to one who had previously been occupied in rural employment. The only wonder is, that a spirited young fellow should have endured it so long as he seems to have done. In the spring of 1784, while walking in St James's Park one Sunday, as was his custom, to feast his eyes 'with the sight of the trees, the grass, and the water,' he saw an advertisement 'inviting all loyal young men, who had a mind to gain riches and glory, to repair to a certain rendezvous, where they might enter into his majesty's marine service, and have the peculiar happiness and honour of being enrolled in the Chatham Division.' As he still retained the desire to go to sea, and as he knew that the marines spend most of their time on that element, he took the shilling; but without making due inquiry, as he found that he had enlisted in a marching regiment, the 54th, the head-quarters of which were at that time in Nova Scotia.

'As peace had then taken place, no great haste was made to send recruits off to their regiments. I remained upwards of a year at Chatham, during which time I was employed in learning my exercise, and taking my turn in the duty of the garrison. My leisure time, which was a very considerable portion of the twenty-four hours, was spent, not in the dissipations common to such a way of life, but in reading and study. In the course of this year I learned more than I had ever done before. I subscribed to a circulating library at Brompton, the greatest part of the books in which I read more than once over. The library was not very considerable, it is true, nor in my reading was I directed by any degree of taste or choice. Novels, plays, history, poetry, all were read, and nearly with equal avidity.

'Such a course of reading could be attended with but little profit: it was skimming over the surface of everything. One branch of learning, however, I went to the bottom with—and that the most essential branch too—the grammar of my mother tongue. I had experienced the want of a knowledge of grammar during my stay with Mr Holland; but it is very probable that I never

should have thought of encountering the study of it, had not accident placed me under a man whose friendship extended beyond his interest. Writing a fair hand procured me the honour of being copyist to Colonel Debeig, the commandant of the garrison. I transcribed the famous correspondence between him and the Duke of Richmond, which ended in the good and gallant old colonel being stripped of the reward bestowed on him for his long and meritorious servitude.

'Being totally ignorant of the rules of grammar, I necessarily made many mistakes in copying; because no one can copy letter by letter, nor even word by word. The colonel saw my deficiency, and strongly recommended study. He enforced his advice with a sort of injunction, and with a promise of reward in case of success. I procured me a Lowth's Grammar, and applied myself to the study of it with unceasing assiduity, and not without some profit; for though it was a considerable time before I fully comprehended all that I read, still I read and studied with such unremitting attention, that at last I could write without falling into any very gross errors. The pains I took cannot be described. I wrote the whole grammar out two or three times. I got it by heart. I repeated it every morning and every evening, and when on guard. I imposed on myself the task of saying it all over once every time I was posted sentinel. To this exercise of my memory I ascribe the retentiveness of which I have since found it capable; and to the success with which it was attended, I ascribe the perseverance that has led to the acquirement of the little learning of which I am master.'

His steadiness and regularity soon led to promotion. In a very short time he was made corporal—no great advance it may be thought; but to him, at that stage of his progress, a most notable event, seeing that it raised his small income 'a clear twopence per diem.' A few months after his enlistment, the detachment to which he belonged sailed from Gravesend for Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he joined his regiment, and from which he proceeded with it to St John's and New Brunswick shortly afterwards. By the end of his third year in the army, he was promoted to the rank of sergeant-major, over the heads of thirty sergeants; and this promotion appears to have been mainly owing to the excellent character he had acquired for early rising, and extraordinary attention to the duties of his profession. In his *Advice to Young Men*, he says, with reference to this period of his life: 'Before my promotion, a clerk was wanted to make out the morning report of the regiment. I rendered the clerk unnecessary; and long before any other man was dressed for the parade, my work for the morning was all done, and I myself was on the parade walking, in fine weather, perhaps for an hour. My custom was thus—to get up in summer in daylight, and in winter at four o'clock; shave, dress, even to the putting on my sword-belt over my shoulder, and having my sword lying on the table before me ready to hang by my side.

Then I ate a bit of cheese, or pork and bread. Then I prepared my report, which was filled up as fast as the companies brought me in the materials. After this, I had an hour or two to read before the time came for any duty out of doors, unless when the regiment or part of it went to exercise in the morning. When this was the case, and the matter left to me, I always had it on the ground in such time that the bayonets glittered in the rising sun—a sight which gave me delight, of which I often think, but which in vain I should endeavour to describe. If the officers were to go out, eight or ten o'clock was the hour, sweating the men in the heat of the day, breaking in upon the time of cooking their dinner, putting all things out of order, and everybody out of humour. When I was the commander, the men had a long day of leisure before them: they could ramble into the town, or into the woods; go to get raspberries; to catch birds, to catch fish, or to pursue any other recreation; and such of them as chose, and were qualified, to work at their trades. So that here, arising solely from the early habits of one young man, were pleasant and happy days given to hundreds.' This topic of early rising—its manifold advantages, and the importance of acquiring the habit in early life, if a man wishes to make his way in the world—is one on which he is never tired of expatiating, especially in that most entertaining and instructive of his works, the *Advice to Young Men.* It is in that work also, in his 'Letter to a Lover,' that he gives an account of his first introduction to the worthy young woman who afterwards became his wife, and who appears to have recommended herself to his favour in no small degree by her early rising and her industry.

'When I first saw my wife,' says Cobbett, 'she was thirteen years old, and I was within a month of twenty-one. She was the daughter of a sergeant-major of artillery, and I was the sergeant-major of a regiment of foot, both stationed in forts near the city of St John, in the province of New Brunswick. I sat in the same room with her for about an hour, in company with others, and I made up my mind that she was the very girl for me. That I thought her beautiful is certain, for that I had always said should be an indispensable qualification; but I saw in her what I deemed marks of that sobriety of conduct of which I have said so much, and which has been by far the greatest blessing of my life. It was now dead of winter, and of course the snow several feet deep on the ground, and the weather piercing cold. It was my habit, when I had done my morning's writing, to go out at break of day to take a walk on a hill at the foot of which our barracks lay. In about three mornings after I had first seen her, I had by an invitation to breakfast, got up two young men to join me in my walk, and our road lay by the house of her father and mother. It was hardly light, but she was out on the snow scrubbing out a washing-tub. "That's the girl for me," said I, when we had got out of her hearing. One of these young men came to England soon

afterwards; and he who kept an inn in Yorkshire came over to Preston, at the time of the election, to verify whether I was the same man. When he found that I was, he appeared surprised; but what was his surprise when I told him that those tall young men whom he saw around me, were the sons of that pretty little girl that he and I saw scrubbing out the washing-tub on the snow in New Brunswick, at daybreak in the morning!

'From the day that I first spoke to her, I never had a thought of her ever being the wife of any other man, more than I had a thought of her being transformed into a chest of drawers; and I formed my resolution at once to marry her as soon as we could get permission, and to get out of the army as soon as I could. So that this matter was at once settled as firmly as if written in the book of fate. At the end of about six months, my regiment, and I along with it, were removed to Fredericton, a distance of 100 miles up the river St John, and which was worse, the artillery were expected to go off a year or two before our regiment. The artillery went, and she along with them; and now it was that I acted a part becoming a real and sensible lover. I was aware that when she got to that gay place, Woolwich, the house of her father and mother, necessarily visited by numerous persons not the most select, might become unpleasant to her, and I did not like, besides, that she should continue to work hard. I had saved 150 guineas, the earnings of my early hours, in writing for the pay-master, the quarter-master, and others, in addition to the savings of my own pay. I sent her all my money before she sailed, and wrote to her to beg of her, if she found her home uncomfortable, to hire a lodging with respectable people; and at anyrate, not to spare the money by any means, but to buy herself good clothes, and to live without hard work, until I arrived in England; and I, in order to induce her to lay out the money, told her that I should get plenty more before I came home.

'As the malignity of the devil would have it, we were kept abroad two years later than our time, Mr Pitt—England not being then so tame as she is now—having knocked up a dust with Spain about Nootka Sound. O how I cursed Nootka Sound, and poor bawling Pitt too, I am afraid! At the end of four years, however, home I came, landed at Portsmouth, and got my discharge from the army by the great kindness of poor Lord Edward Fitzgerald, who was then the major of my regiment. I found my little girl a servant-of-all-work—and hard work it was—in the house of a Captain Brisac; and without hardly saying a word about the matter, she put into my hands the whole of my 150 guineas unbroken! Need I tell the reader what my feelings were? Need I tell kind-hearted English parents what effect this anecdote must have produced on the minds of our children? Need I attempt to describe what effect this example ought to have on every young woman who shall do me the honour to read this book? Admiration of her conduct, and self-gratulation

on this indubitable proof of the soundness of my own judgment, were now added to my love of her beautiful person.

'Now, I do not say that there are not many young women of this country who would, under similar circumstances, have acted as my wife did in this case; on the contrary, I hope, and sincerely do believe, that there are. But when her age is considered; when we reflect that she was living in a place crowded, literally crowded, with gaily-dressed and handsome young men, many of whom really far richer and in higher rank than I was, and scores of them ready to offer her their hand; when we reflect that she was living amongst young women who put upon their backs every shilling that they could come at; when we see her keeping the bag of gold untouched, and working hard to provide herself with but mere necessary apparel, and doing all this while she was passing from fourteen to eighteen years of age; when we view the whole of the circumstances, we must say that here is an example which, while it reflects honour on her sex, ought to have weight with every young woman whose eyes or ears this relation shall reach.'

Well might Cobbett indulge in honest exultation over so admirable an instance of constancy and well-governed conduct in a girl of that age, and even in some little self-gratulation at so indubitable a proof of the soundness of his judgment, in having fixed his affections on so worthy an object. To this excellent woman he was married at Woolwich, on the 5th of February 1792, a few months after his return from New Brunswick; and it is pleasant to know, from his own frequent and affectionate mention of her in many parts of his writings, as well as from the testimony of friends, that his domestic life was happier than that of most men. Ten years after their marriage, he speaks of her in his *Political Register* as one 'to whose gentleness, prudence, and fortitude, I owe whatever I enjoy of pleasure, of fortune, or of reputation;' and many years later, Miss Mitford, in a delightful sketch of a visit she once paid to Botley, when Cobbett lived there, describes his wife as 'a sweet motherly woman, realising our notion of one of Scott's most charming characters, Ailie Dinmont, in her simplicity, her kindness, and her devotion to her husband and children.'

Cobbett's honeymoon was disturbed by a disagreeable affair. Soon after his discharge, he had accused four officers of the 54th Regiment of having made false returns of the musters, and of having embezzled the regimental stores. A court-martial was ordered to be held at the Horse Guards, on the 24th of March 1792, for the trial of the parties accused, but Cobbett did not make his appearance. The matter has often been brought up by his enemies, as one in which he acted dishonourably; but his own account of the transaction, which occupies nearly one-half of the *Register* for June 17, 1809, completely justifies the course he took. From his statement of the affair, it is evident that, although he had taken the

utmost pains in getting up his case, he would have been no match for the unscrupulous parties with whom he had to deal, and that his persisting in it would only have had the effect of bringing himself and others into trouble. Under these circumstances, he left England for France before the day of trial, and thus laid himself open to the charge of having libelled the character of honest men, without the slightest foundation for so doing. In his autobiography, he makes no allusion to the cause of his leaving England. He merely says: 'I arrived in France in March 1792, and continued there till the beginning of September, the six happiest months of my life.' He does not mention what part of France he resided in during these six months. All we learn from his brief allusion to the time he sojourned there is, that he never saw Paris. 'I did intend to stay in France,' he says, 'till the spring of 1793, as well to perfect myself in the language as to pass the winter at Paris. But I perceived the storm gathering; I saw that a war with England was inevitable, and it was not difficult to see what would be the fate of Englishmen in that country, where the rulers had laid aside even the appearance of justice and mercy. I wished, however, to see Paris, and actually hired a coach to go thither: I was even on the way, when I heard at Abbeville that the king was dethroned, and his guards murdered. This intelligence made me turn off towards Havre-de-Grace, whence I embarked for America.'

He landed at New York in the month of October, without any very clear notion, apparently, of how he was to earn his living. Twelve months without work, his journey to France, his residence there, and his voyage to America, must have consumed the whole of the 150 guineas which his wife had kept so carefully; so that he must have found it necessary to set to work at something or other as soon as he landed. He had brought with him a letter of recommendation from the American ambassador at the Hague to Mr Jefferson, at that time secretary of state, and this he forwarded without delay; but if he entertained any expectation of aid from that most unlikely quarter, he soon found out his mistake. Mr Jefferson, in his reply, told him that public offices were so few in America, and of so little value, as to offer no resource to talent. Cobbett was not the man to despond, however. With the knowledge of French, which he had acquired during his late residence in France, and his mastery of English grammar, he deemed himself sufficiently qualified to offer his services to Frenchmen as a teacher of English; and, accordingly, he took up his abode in Philadelphia, with the intention of earning his bread by that means. He has nowhere given any account of how he succeeded as a teacher. Here and there, indeed, he makes a stray allusion to the time when he had Frenchmen for his pupils, but in no place does he give any particulars as to whether he was successful or not. Of his domestic life at that period, however, he has given us various interesting sketches in his *Advice to Young Men*,

as he almost invariably refers to some part of his own life as the exemplar which they are to follow. Thus we learn that, during the first year or two of his residence in Philadelphia, he kept no servant, 'though well able to keep one,' so that he cannot have been very badly off. 'And never in my whole life,' says Cobbett, 'did I live in a house so clean, in such trim order; and never have I eaten or drunk, or slept or dressed, in a manner so perfectly to my taste as I did then. I had a great deal of business to attend to, that took me a great part of the day from home; but whenever I could spare a minute from business, the child was in my arms. I rendered the mother's labour as light as I could; any bit of food satisfied me. When watching was necessary, we shared it between us; that famous grammar for teaching French people English—which has been for thirty years, and still is, the great work of the kind throughout all America, and in every nation in Europe—was written by me, in hours not employed in business, and in great part during my share of the night-watchings over a sick, and then only child, who, after lingering many months, died in my arms. This was the way that we went on: this was the way that we began our married life.'

It was in the summer of 1794, a year and a half after he landed in the United States, that William Cobbett commenced his career as a political writer, and from that time till his death the pen was seldom out of his hand. He was then in his thirty-third year, had seen a good deal of the world, and had witnessed the volcanic outburst of the French Revolution, which must have made a deep and lasting impression upon such a mind as his. That strong love of order, and firm sense of duty, which he always preserved; his warm attachment to his native land and all its institutions; his hearty detestation of French philosophy and English Jacobinism; all conspired to make him what we should call a thoroughgoing Tory of the old school, with all its virtues, and no ordinary share of its failings. His eight years' residence in New Brunswick must also have greatly strengthened these feelings. That colony was then the asylum of those 'Yankee loyalists,' to whom he more than once alludes, and from whom he was not likely to derive a very favourable impression of the model republic, then only in its infancy. No wonder, then, that his first appearance as a pamphleteer should have been provoked by the arrival of Dr Priestley in the United States, and by what he calls 'the fulsome and consequential addresses sent him by the pretended patriots, and his canting replies, at once calculated to flatter the people here and to degrade his country and mine.' The English philosopher, who had been forced to leave his native land in consequence of his attachment to the cause of freedom, arrived at New York on the 12th of June 1794, and in the following month Mr Cobbett published his *Observations on the Emigration of Doctor Joseph Priestley*, under the signature of Peter Porcupine, which soon afterwards became so celebrated in England as well as in America. He first offered

the pamphlet to Mr Carey, of Philadelphia, whose treatment of the young author was not very ceremonious. 'Mr Carey received me,' he says, 'as booksellers generally receive authors (I mean authors whom they get little by): he looked at the title from top to bottom, and then at me from head to foot—"No, *my lad*," says he, "I don't think it will suit." My lad! God in heaven forgive me! I believe that, at that moment, I wished for another yellow fever to strike the city; not to destroy the inhabitants, but to furnish me, too, with the subject of a pamphlet that might make me rich.' He then went to a Mr Bradford, who agreed to publish it at his own risk, and divide the profits with the author; but these did not put much money in his pocket, as the whole amount which fell to his share, when Mr Bradford rendered him an account of the sales, was only 'one shilling and sevenpence half-penny currency (or about elevenpence three-farthings sterling), quite entirely clear of all deductions whatsoever!' After this transaction, Cobbett gave up the plan of publishing and sharing the profits. When he had written a pamphlet, he made a bargain for it at once; and the following list of his various publications during the next two years, shews that the new plan was a decided improvement on the old one, so far as his own interest was concerned:—*Observations*, 20 cents; *Bone to Gnaw*, Part I., 125 dollars; *Kick for a Bite*, 20 dollars; *Bone to Gnaw*, Part II., 40 dollars; *Plain English*, 100 dollars; *New-year's Gift*, 100 dollars; *Prospect*, 18 dollars. Total, 403 dollars 20 cents.

Four hundred dollars in two years was no very large sum; but we must remember that, during this period, he was not depending mainly on his literary labours for his living. He still continued to teach Frenchmen English, at six dollars a month, as we learn from an amusing account he gives in his *Gazette Selections*, of an interview he had, in 1796, with Talleyrand, who offered him twenty dollars a month for lessons in English, and had his liberal offer refused. 'I told him,' says Cobbett, 'that being engaged in a translation for the press, I could not possibly quit home. This difficulty the lame fiend hopped over in a moment: he would very gladly come to my house. I cannot say but it would have been a great satisfaction to me to have seen the ci-devant bishop of Autun, the guardian of the oil that anointed the heads of the descendants of St Louis, come trudging through the dirt to receive a lesson from me; but, on the other hand, I did not want a French spy to take a survey either of my desk or my house. My price for teaching was six dollars a month; he offered me twenty; but I refused, and before I left him, I gave him clearly to understand that I was not to be purchased.'

The fame which Cobbett had acquired as an anonymous author, though quite enough for any ordinary man, was not enough to satisfy him. With his indomitable pugnacity and inordinate self-esteem, he could not bear to remain in the background much longer, and therefore he resolved to commence business as a

bookseller, and come forward openly as the publisher of his own works—a step to which he was doubtless all the more strongly tempted by the knowledge that his pamphlets sold exceedingly well, and that he had not received so large a share of the profits as he fancied he ought to have.

Cobbett's commencement of business as a bookseller, which took place in the spring of 1796, caused an extraordinary sensation in Philadelphia. He had now been nearly two years engaged as a pamphleteer, under the name of Peter Porcupine, and had during that time created a host of enemies, by the freedom with which he had spoken of the faults of America and France, and the undaunted manner in which he had stood forward in defence of his native country against all assailants. So long as he preserved his incognito, the public indignation was kept within comparatively moderate bounds, but when he announced his intention to open a shop, and actually sell his own pamphlets, even his own friends became seriously alarmed for the consequences. The shop which he took appears to have been rather a large one for a man who could not have had much capital of his own. The *Aurora* newspaper speaks of him as having been previously in very low circumstances; so poor, indeed, as to be 'literally without hardly bread to eat, and not a second shirt to his back;' and then goes on to say, that from the extreme of poverty he had suddenly obtained the means of making a better appearance, 'having taken a house for the sale of his poison, at the enormous rent of 1200 dollars a year, and paid a year's rent in advance.' The object of the *Aurora* was to make it appear that Cobbett was an English spy—a charge which he was at very great pains to disprove; but he cautiously abstains from saying anything about his house at 1200 dollars a year, or how he had obtained capital enough to commence so large an undertaking. Had he been able to shew that the money which had enabled him to pay a year's rent in advance, and purchase the stock required for so large a place of business was the fruit of his own labour, he would doubtless have done so. We are left to conclude, therefore, that he must have had assistance from some quarter or other; nor is it surprising that, under the circumstances, his enemies should have endeavoured to fix upon him the title of 'Billy Pitt's agent.' The more probable explanation of the matter is, that he had received assistance from some of his wealthy friends and admirers, of whom he had many in the United States, as well as in our North American colonies. Some years after, when condemned to pay a fine of 5000 dollars, for a libel on Dr Rush, the whole of the money was provided by his friends, or, as he says, 'by British gentlemen in Canada and the United States.' Had they not paid it, his American admirers offered to pay every farthing of the fine, so that he must have had many friends ready to assist him.

Soon after he had opened his shop, he commenced a daily newspaper, under the title of *Porcupine's Gazette*, in which he carried

on the war against French republicanism and American democracy with unrelenting hostility. Those who have any wish to make themselves familiar with the party politics of America from 1795 to 1800, will find ample materials for such a study in the twelve volumes of *Porcupine's Works*, published by Cobbett soon after his return from America. The most remarkable feature in this collection of what he must have deemed the best of his pamphlets and newspaper articles, is the very small amount of autobiography it contains. It is there, indeed, that he gives his life of Peter Porcupine; but that was merely by way of reply to certain libellous attacks upon him. Later in life, his political writings are full of pleasant digressions and episodes, many of them throwing considerable light upon his early life. In his American articles the style is always characteristic. No one acquainted with his writings can fail to recognise the savage personality and withering sarcasm with which he attacks public delinquency wherever he can find it. In that respect, his earliest articles are quite as remarkable as those of his riper years; but they fall far short of the latter in all the finer and more exquisite touches of pathos and humour, and especially in those charming pictures of rural life and scenery which are scattered so lavishly throughout his *Political Register*. But Peter Porcupine was a young and ardent politician, and he lived in the midst of a far more intense political struggle than we are now able to form any just conception of. What wonder that he was in no mood for taking a backward glance, at times, into the poetical aspect of things when he had so hard a daily battle to fight with those whom he looked upon as the enemies of the human race.

Considering the amount of personal feeling with which Cobbett was inspired in almost all his writings, it was natural to expect that he would, sooner or later, come under the lash of the law. He was twice prosecuted for libel during his residence in America, but on only one occasion was he found guilty. The first prosecution, which took place in August 1797, was undertaken at the instance of the Spanish minister in the United States, who fancied that the king of Spain had been insulted in *Porcupine's Gazette*. The trial took place in the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. Judge M'Kean, a vulgar, bullying lawyer, who presided, and who had become an inveterate enemy of Cobbett, in consequence of his having been exposed in the Gazette, did all in his power to bias the minds of the jury, but without effect. A majority ignored the bill, and Peter Porcupine was triumphant. But 'Kite M'Kean,' as Cobbett had nicknamed his enemy, and who appears to have been every way worthy of all the vituperations of the Gazette, if ever any man was, soon had his revenge on the insolent Englishman, who so fearlessly exposed all the faults and failings of Jonathan, at a time when he was ten times more sensitive than he is at the present day. A second action for libel was brought against Cobbett by Dr Rush of Philadelphia, who had become

notorious for his mode of treating cases of yellow fever, and for the mortality attending it. The action, which was brought by Rush in the early part of 1798, was kept hanging over the head of Mr Cobbett till the end of the following year, when Judge M'Kean, who had made up his mind to ruin his unrelenting libeller, having got all his preparations completed, brought on the cause for trial, when Cobbett was found guilty, and sentenced to pay 5000 dollars by way of damages. To this large sum must be added the costs of the trial, the sacrifice of property taken in execution, and sold by the sheriff at public auction; 'so that,' as he states in an advertisement announcing a new publication, to be called the *Rushlight*, 'the total of what has been and will be wrested from me by Rush, will fall little short of 8000 dollars.' Whether it was that the new paper did not answer his expectations, or that he had become thoroughly tired of a country which had used him so ill, he very soon extinguished the *Rushlight*, and bade farewell to America.

On the 1st of June 1800, Mr Cobbett sailed from New York for England, after publishing a highly characteristic farewell address to the people of the United States, in the Philadelphia papers. 'You will doubtless be astonished,' he says, 'that after having had such a smack of the sweets of liberty, I should think of rising thus abruptly from the feast; but this astonishment will cease when you consider that, under a general term, things diametrically opposite in their natures are frequently included, and that flavours are not more various than tastes. Thus, for instance, nourishment of every species is called food, and we all like food; but while one is partial to roast beef and plum-pudding, another is distractedly fond of flummery and mush. So it is with respect to liberty, of which, out of its infinite variety of sorts, yours, unfortunately, happens to be the sort which I do not like. . . . . To my friends, who are also the real friends of America, I wish that peace and happiness which virtue ought to insure, but which I greatly fear they will not find; and as to my enemies, I can wish them no severer scourge, than that which they are preparing for themselves and their country. With this I depart for my native land, where neither the moth of democracy nor the rust of federalism doth corrupt, and where thieves do not, with impunity, break through and steal 5000 dollars at a time.'

No sooner had he landed in England, than he began to make preparations for the publication of a daily newspaper, which was not quite so formidable an undertaking in those days as it is at present. Previous to doing so, however, he appears to have paid a visit to his birthplace, as will be seen from the following charming description, which first appeared in his *Year's Residence in America*, published in 1828:—'When I returned to England, in 1800, after an absence from the country parts of it of sixteen years, the trees, the hedges, even the parks and woods seemed so *small!* It made me laugh to hear little gutters that I could jump

over called *rivers*. The Thames was a *creek*. But when, in about a month after my arrival in London, I went to Farnham, the place of my birth, what was my surprise! Everything was become so pitifully *small!* I had to cross, in my post-chaise, the long and dreary heath of Bagshot; then, at the end of it, to mount a hill called Hungry Hill; and from that hill I knew that I should look down into the beautiful and fertile vale of Farnham. My heart fluttered with impatience, mixed with a sort of fear, to see all the scenes of my childhood, for I had learned before, the death of my father and mother. There is a hill not far from the town called Crooksbury Hill, which rises up out of a flat in the form of a cone, and is planted with Scotch fir-trees. Here I used to take the eggs and young ones of crows and magpies. This hill was a famous object in the neighbourhood. It served as the superlative degree of height. "As high as Crooksbury Hill," meant with us the utmost degree of height. Therefore the first object that my eyes sought was this hill. I could not believe my eyes! Literally speaking, I for a moment thought the famous hill removed, and a little heap put in its place; for I had seen in New Brunswick a single rock, or hill of solid rock, ten times as big, and four or five times as high! The postboy going down hill, and not a bad road, whisked me in a few minutes to the Bush Inn, from the garden of which I could see the prodigious sand-hill where I had begun my gardening works. What a nothing! But now came rushing into my mind all at once my pretty little garden, my little blue smock-frock, my little nailed shoes, my pretty pigeons, that I used to feed out of my hands, and the last kind words and tears of my gentle and tender-hearted and affectionate mother! I hastened back into the room; if I had looked a moment longer, I should have dropped. When I came to reflect—what a change! I looked down at my dress—what a change! What scenes I had gone through! How altered my state! I had dined the day before at the secretary of state's, in company with Mr Pitt, and had been waited upon by men in gaudy liveries! I had had nobody to assist me in the world. No teachers of any sort; nobody to shelter me from the consequence of bad, and no one to counsel me to good behaviour. I felt proud. The distinctions of rank, birth, and wealth, all became nothing in my eyes; and from that moment—less than a month after my arrival in England—I resolved never to bend before them.' The dining at Mr Windham's, then secretary at war, in company with Mr Pitt, appears to have made a deep impression upon his mind, for he frequently refers to that memorable event. But his profound admiration of the 'Heaven-born minister' met with no grateful return from that great man, whose aristocratic sensitiveness was no doubt shocked by the indomitable individuality and undisciplined fierceness of Mr Windham's protégé. Perhaps he suspected also, that the Ishmaelite spirit which had enabled Cobbett to render himself so powerful an enemy of democracy in America,

would not be inclined to submit quietly to Treasury influence in England. Whatever the cause may have been, the fact is certain that Mr Pitt shewed an unfriendly spirit towards Mr Cobbett, notwithstanding all the efforts of Mr Windham to recommend him to ministerial favour. In the list of subscribers to the republication, in 1801, of *Porcupine's Works*, in twelve volumes, we find the names of the Prince of Wales and his royal brothers; of Canning, Castlereagh, Huskisson, Rose, Windham, and a whole host of bishops and peers; but we look in vain for that of Mr Pitt; and his unwillingness to lend the influence of his name to that undertaking, must have convinced Mr Cobbett, even if there had been no other evidence, that he need look for no aid from the prime minister of England.

The first number of the *Porcupine*, a new daily paper, 'Printed and published by William Cobbett, No. 3 Southampton Street, Strand,' made its appearance on the 29th of October 1800; and the motto under which it erected its angry quills—'Fear God, Honour the King'—shewed that its politics were decidedly of the Tory and High-church complexion. At that period, Cobbett's hatred of the Dissenters was as hearty and unsparing as his abuse of the Established Church became a few years afterward. In his prospectus he says: 'It is with no small mortification that I find too many of the periodical publications in the hands of fanatics and infidels, all of whom, however numerous their mongrel sects, however opposite their tenets, however hateful their persons to each other, do most cordially unite in their enmity to the national establishments, and most zealously co-operate for their destruction. Convinced as I am from the experience of America, as well as from history in general, that an established church is absolutely necessary to the existence of religion and morality; convinced also that the Church of England, while she is an ornament, an honour, and a blessing to the nation, is the principal pillar to the throne, I trust I shall never be base enough to decline a combat with her enemies, whether they approach me in the lank-locks of the sectary or the scald crop of the Jacobin.' Notwithstanding these strong professions of loyalty, the *Porcupine* does not appear to have been a very profitable speculation; indeed, Cobbett never was successful in any of his attempts to make a popular newspaper. His forte lay chiefly in his power of criticising public men and measures. No writer of the present century could compare with him in that respect; but all his attempts at journalism, strictly speaking, proved signal failures. The *Porcupine* struggled on till the latter end of 1801, when it amalgamated with another daily paper called the *True Briton*, soon after which Mr Cobbett ceased to have any connection with it.

Cobbett had returned from America, as he mentions in one of his *Registers*, with the intention of confining himself to the business of bookselling; and although he had been persuaded by the Tories to

start a daily newspaper, he never gave up his original intention. In 1801, he commenced business, accordingly, with a partner, the firm being 'Cobbett and Morgan, at the Crown and Mitre, Pall Mall.' As to what the nature and extent of his bookselling business may have been, we have little or no means of judging. In an article in the *Register* on the increased duty on printed paper, in 1802, he supports the government, although more immediately interested in the question than almost any man in the kingdom. 'In proportion to our small capital,' he says, 'nobody exports so many books as my partner and myself;' and then he goes on to shew, that if there had been any ground for apprehension that our export trade would be injured by the increased duty, which he denied, he and his partner would have been the first to feel alarm. We may take for granted, therefore, that his knowledge of the American market, together with his colonial connection, had probably enabled Messrs Cobbett and Morgan to carry on a very profitable trade in the exportation of books, the Americans being utterly unable to compete with us at that period.

The first number of the *Weekly Political Register*, with which Cobbett's fame as a writer is so intimately associated, appeared in January 1802, from which time up till 1835, the year of his death, that faithful record of his delightful egotism, his extreme opinionativeness, his matchless invective against all public offenders, and his numberless schemes for putting public affairs in perfect order, was kept up to the last, with unabated vigour, by the marvellous force of his single pen. For the first two or three years, a considerable portion of the *Register* was devoted to the publication of parliamentary proceedings, state papers, and various kinds of useful political and general information. His object was to make it what no weekly newspaper ever can be—a complete register of political intelligence. Nor was it long before he began to find his mistake. One after another, the different departments of routine news and dull official documents were thrust aside to make room for the sparkling, racy, and everwelcome letters from his own pen on all the engrossing topics of the day. In his style he has been compared to Swift, to Defoe, and sometimes to Franklin: nor would it be difficult to find many passages in the *Register* bearing no small resemblance to each of these writers. But, along with much of the circumstantial, graphic, narration-talent of Defoe, the charming simplicity and homely wisdom of Franklin, the idiomatic terseness and humour of Swift, there is an abounding heartiness and a garrulity in most of his writings which stamps them with a special charm, for which we might search in vain through the whole of our ablest political writers.

As a commercial speculation, the *Register* must have been highly successful. By the end of 1803, it had attained a circulation of 4000—rather a large number, when we look at the size and price of the paper. At that time it consisted of sixteen pages only, and did not contain more than about two-thirds of the contents of a

single number of *Chambers's Journal.* As the price was 10d., and there was no expense for contributions, it must have yielded a handsome profit to the editor and proprietor. But Cobbett did not preserve through life the thrifty habits which enabled him to save 150 guineas when he was a sergeant-major. Till the close of his life, he always continued to work as hard as he had done while in the army; but although he earned a large amount of money in his day, he frequently fell into pecuniary difficulties.

When Cobbett returned from America, he was an ultra Tory, and he continued to support ministers for the first two or three years of his journalism with the most enthusiastic zeal and devotion. In his *Register*, however, he very soon began to shew a spirit of independence in his remarks on public affairs, which could not fail to sever his connection with the Church-and-king party, by whom he had been received with open arms when he landed in England. His desertion of the Tory party has generally been ascribed to the supercilious manner in which he was treated by Mr Pitt, but on that point we have no direct evidence. All we know is, that after having been for several years the advocate and eulogist of that minister's character and policy, he became his bitterest enemy. The precise date of this change it would be somewhat difficult to determine; but his hostility to government, and his leaning to the popular party, became very decided after his first conviction for libel, which took place on the 24th of May 1804. On that occasion he was found guilty of having published certain libels in the *Register*, tending to bring the Earl of Hardwick, lord-lieutenant of Ireland, and several Irish officials, into contempt, and sentenced to pay a fine of L.500. Two days after, an action for damages, which were laid at L.10,000, was brought against Mr Cobbett by Mr Plunkett, attorney-general for Ireland, for a libel on him, in the same article in which were the libels on Lord Hardwick and his colleagues. The jury returned a verdict against the defendant, but they awarded only L.500 in the shape of damages. These prosecutions had been undertaken, as was generally understood, with a view to silence Cobbett; but he was not the man to be put down in that or in any other fashion. Instead of making him more guarded in his criticism of ministers, they only stirred up his hatred of 'the betrayers of the public trust,' as he now styled them, to a more intense degree. The meetings of the people to discuss and condemn the arbitrary measures and corrupt practices of government were now, also, treated in a more respectful manner, nor did he scruple to defend Sir Francis Burdett from the charge of Jacobinism, which some of the ministerial organs had brought against him. The change in the tone of his politics had become very decided by the end of 1804—so much so, indeed, that he makes a distinct reference to the subject in his 'Address to the Public' at the opening of 1805. Not that he considers himself to have changed: it is ministers that have veered round, while he has

been obliged, as an honest journalist, to blame them for their desertion of principle. In reply to the statements of the ministerial press, that his opposition to government had injured the circulation of the *Register*, he affirms that, 'notwithstanding the unexampled depopulation of the town, during the six months embraced by the volume just finished, there were many more copies of this work sold during that time than during any former six months since the commencement of the work.' A few of his subscribers, indeed, had found fault with the course he was taking, but a far larger number had expressed their satisfaction with the way in which he attacked ministers. He had received '150 written assurances' from persons who had formerly admired Mr Pitt, that the arguments in the *Register* had destroyed their faith in that statesman's political wisdom and integrity, and 'only seven letters expressing dissent' from his opinions on that head. With so large a majority of his constituents in favour of the course he had been pursuing, no wonder that he felt encouraged to go on.

Although steadily opposed to the Pitt ministry, and anxious to see Sir Francis Burdett returned for Middlesex, he did not see his way with regard to parliamentary reform for some time. Even in 1806, he contended that so long as the funding system remained, there was no good to be expected from any attempt to reform parliament. As for universal suffrage, he says; 'I have seen the effects of it too attentively, and with too much disgust, ever to think of it with approbation.' He was, however, gradually brought more and more into contact with the Radical party, who gladly hailed the accession to their ranks of so powerful a writer. Before long, he had become one of the most fearless champions of reform. The vindictive style in which the ministerial journals spoke of him and his *Register*, shewed that his merciless blows were felt by those in power, and that no opportunity would be lost of making him feel the vengeance of the law. For awhile, the pecuniary warnings he had received in 1804 had had the effect of making him more guarded in his language, but the impetuosity of his temper could not always be restrained. In the *Register* of the 1st of July 1809, he made some very severe remarks on the flogging of five soldiers belonging to a militia regiment then stationed at Ely, under a guard of the German Legion, which attracted the notice of the attorney-general, Sir Vicary Gibbs. Owing to some cause or other, the trial was postponed till the summer of 1810. The information was tried on the 15th of June, before Lord Ellenborough, and Cobbett was again found guilty. On the 9th of July, he was brought up for judgment, and sentenced to be imprisoned in Newgate for two years; to pay a fine of L.1000; and at the expiration of the two years, to give security for his good behaviour for seven years, himself in L.3000, and two securities in L.1000 each. So severe a sentence was not intended merely as a punishment for the libel he had written, but

by way of revenge for the way in which he had dared to attack ministers, and for his systematic attempts to bring the government of that day into contempt.

In his *Register* of the 14th July 1810, dated from Newgate, he alludes to his incarceration in the following terms :—'After having published seventeen volumes of this work, embracing the period of eight years and a half, during which time I have written with my own hand nearly 2000 articles upon various subjects, without having, except in one single instance, incurred even the threats of the law, I begin the eighteenth volume in a prison. In this respect, however, I only share the lot of many men who have inhabited this prison before me; nor have I the smallest doubt that I shall be enabled to follow the example of those men. On the triumphing, the boundless joy, the feasting and shouting of the peculators or public robbers, and of all those, whether profligate or hypocritical villains, of whom I have been the scourge, I look with contempt, knowing very well, feeling in my heart that my situation, even at this time, is infinitely preferable to theirs; and as to the future, I can reasonably promise myself days of peace and happiness, while continual dread must haunt their guilty minds; while every stir and every sound must make them quake for fear. *Their* day is yet to come!' Throughout the rest of his life, this feeling of vengeance against his enemies never ceased to animate him. Again and again, he returns to his imprisonment in Newgate for having commented on the flogging of English soldiers under German bayonets, and seldom without vowing revenge against his persecutors.

At the time of his imprisonment, Cobbett's family were residing at Botley, a fine old mansion in Hampshire, 'with a beautiful lawn and gardens sweeping down to the Bursledon river.' There he had lived for a number of years as a gentleman farmer, indulging his love for gardening and agricultural pursuits, at the same time that he was carrying on the war against Pitt's funding system, and the government by which that system was maintained. This seems to have been by far the happiest and most prosperous period of his life. The *Weekly Register* yielded a handsome income, gave ample scope for the exercise of his restless literary and political ambition, and yet did not engross the whole of his time. He had a large amount of leisure, which he mainly spent in the midst of his affectionate family, his garden, and his farm, as he does not seem to have mixed much in public affairs at that period. The smoke and bustle of London could easily be endured for one or two days in the week, when he knew that he could escape at any moment to the pure atmosphere and delightful seclusion of Botley.

It was during his residence in Hampshire that Miss Mitford. then a mere girl, paid him that visit of which she has given so pleasant a description in her *Reminiscences;* and it would seem from her account that he lived in a most bountiful style.

'There was a large fluctuating series of guests for the hour, or guests for the day, of almost all ranks and descriptions, from the earl and his countess to the farmer and his dame. The house had room for all, and the hearts of the owners would have had room for three times the number. I never saw hospitality more genuine, more simple, or more thoroughly successful in the great end of hospitality—the putting everybody completely at ease. There was not the slightest attempt at finery, or display, or gentility. They called it a farmhouse, and everything was in accordance with the largest idea of a great English yeoman of the old time. Everything was excellent, everything abundant—all served with the greatest nicety by trim waiting-damsels; and everything went on with such quiet regularity, that of the large circle of guests not one could find himself in the way.'

Of Cobbett himself, who was then in the height of his political reputation, she speaks in the most enthusiastic terms. His unfailing good-humour and good spirits, his early rising, his heartiness and love of field-sports, seem to have made a deep impression on the young girl, who little thought at that time that she also would become not less celebrated than her host for her descriptions of English rural scenery. As to his personal appearance, she describes him as 'a tall, stout man, fair and sunburnt, with an air compounded of the soldier and the farmer, to which his habit of wearing an eternal red waistcoat contributed not a little.' His beautiful farm and garden, and the manner in which they were cultivated, called forth her warmest approbation. 'The fields lay along the Bursledon river, and might have been shewn to a foreigner as a specimen of the richest and loveliest English scenery. In the cultivation of his garden, too, he displayed the same taste. Few persons excelled him in the management of vegetables, fruits, and flowers. His green Indian corn, his Carolina beans, his water-melons, could hardly have been excelled even at New York. His wall-fruit was equally splendid; and much as flowers have been studied since that day, I never saw a more glowing or a more fragrant autumn garden than that at Botley, with its pyramids of hollyhocks, and its masses of China-asters, of foxgloves, of mignonette, and of variegated geranium.' Well might Cobbett feel enraged at being torn away from so delightful a retirement. In his active bustling life, he had met with several reverses; but never had he encountered such a change as the transition from that paradise at Botley, and the happy life he led there, surrounded by his family and friends, to the strong room at Newgate! His spirits never sunk, however: he still went on from week to week with his letters to public men; still used the lash as vigorously as ever against 'all knaves and dastards.' The only difference which the readers of the *Register* could perceive was, that his letters were now dated from Newgate instead of Botley. As to his farming operations, he carried them on by letter also, as well as that could be done. 'I gave all the orders,'

he says, 'whether as to purchases, sales, ploughing, sowing, breeding—in short, with regard to everything, and the things were in endless number and variety, and always full of interest.' To carry on this correspondence, he had always one or two of his children with him, having hired the best part of the keeper's house 'at twelve guineas a week.' That item alone, for two years, would more than double the fine he had been sentenced to pay, so that the expenses altogether must have made a very considerable inroad on his profits, while his affairs were at the same time suffering from his two years' absence from home.

A public dinner was given to Mr Cobbett, at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, on the 9th of July 1812, to celebrate his liberation from Newgate, which took place on that day. Sir Francis Burdett presided on the occasion, and, among other toasts, proposed: 'Our sincere congratulations on the release of that able advocate of parliamentary reform, and zealous opponent of the flogging system—William Cobbett.' In returning thanks, Cobbett replied at some length to the calumnies which his enemies had been busily circulating, in the hope of creating some confusion at the dinner. The *Times* had been accusing him of having changed his opinions, and referred to his attacks upon Sir Francis Burdett some ten years previously. He frankly admitted that he had at one time held opinions widely different from those which he now advocated, but that was no proof of insincerity. Supposing he had been wrong, he had since fairly and candidly acknowledged his error: 'Alteration of sentiment was not to be deemed a demerit in a man, unless it should appear that such alteration had been caused by interested motives.'

He was now at liberty once more, with the character of a martyr in the cause of freedom, and the reputation of being the ablest and most daring champion of the people's cause. But his imprisonment, and the fine of L.1000, which he was obliged to pay for the freedom of his remarks on flogging, gave a serious shock to his circumstances, and ultimately tended in no small degree to land him in those pecuniary embarrassments which caused him to leave the country in 1817. In early life he had been a rigid economist; but the success of his *Register* appears to have gradually led him into an expensive style of living, which, though warranted in some measure by the income he was then making, was ill calculated for any reverse which might occur. In addition to his farm, which must have required a considerable amount of capital at a time when everything was so dear, he had embarked in publishing speculations on a large scale. At the time of his imprisonment, he had undertaken and was carrying on three publications besides the *Political Register*—namely, the *Parliamentary History*, the *Parliamentary Debates*, and the *State Trials*. All of these were works requiring a large expenditure of capital, and yielding only a slow return. At first, he was no doubt able to meet his printer's bills with hard cash; but

ultimately, in spite of his abhorrence of the accommodation-bill system, he must have been obliged, like Sir Walter Scott, at a later period, under similar circumstances, to draw upon the future. In a trial which took place after his return from America in 1820, it was stated by Mr Scarlett that, at the very time, from 1812 to 1817, when he was directing all his energies to write down paper-money, his various farming and publishing speculations were supported by accommodation-bills to the extent of L.60,000 or L.70,000. This paper, which Cobbett hated so much, was negotiated by Mr Wright, with whom he was many years in partnership; and the accounts between the parties became so much involved, that, to use Cobbett's own expression, 'the devil himself could not unravel them.' It was these monetary difficulties, aggravated by the ruinous fall in prices at the close of the war, which led to his sudden flight to America in March 1817. The ostensible cause of his leaving England at that time was his fear of being again sent to Newgate. According to his representation, ministers, in bringing forward the Six Acts Bill for suppressing freedom of discussion, had mainly in view the *Weekly Register*, which had been reduced to 2d. some months previously, and had attained a weekly circulation of 50,000. From his farewell address, it would seem that he was under the influence of a panic, in which pecuniary and political considerations may have had an equal share. A list of his creditors at the time he left England, shews him to have been owing nearly L.40,000; so that one cannot feel much surprise at his coming to the conclusion that England was going to ruin, when he reflected upon the rapid changes which had recently taken place in the value of property, and from which he, as a farmer and as a publisher, had suffered so severely.

Cobbett remained in America about two years and a half, during which time he kept up his *Registers* regularly, shewing up the 'sons and daughters of corruption' as fearlessly as ever. In addition to his literary labours, he took a farm, called Hyde Park, at North Hampstead, Long Island, where he indulged his love of rural occupations, and where he sustained a very serious loss of property on the 20th of May 1819, by a fire which consumed his dwelling-house and the greater part of his farming stock. This blow seems to have made him think of returning home once more, now that England seemed as if it would weather the storm. Accordingly, he left New York in October 1819, a few weeks after the Peterloo Massacre, and arrived at Liverpool on the 20th of November, bringing with him the bones of Thomas Paine, for whose genius he had suddenly conceived a singular regard, on account of his exposure of the funding system. Soon after his arrival in London, he started a daily paper called *Cobbett's Evening Post*, which lasted only about two months. At the end of that time, he found that the *Register* would be as much as he could manage with satisfaction to himself or justice to the public. It

was while the daily paper was in existence, that he made his first unsuccessful attempt to enter parliament, by standing for the representation of Coventry in March 1820, when he polled only 352 votes. His second attempt, in June 1826, when he contested Preston with Mr Stanley, the present Earl of Derby, met with no better success—the numbers at the close of the poll being for Stanley, 3044; Wood, 1982; Cobbett, 995. In spite of these two defeats, however, he still adhered to the determination to become a member of parliament. He flattered himself that, were he once in that assembly, he would very soon convince a majority of its members of the wisdom and excellence of his plans for remedying public grievances. On the 10th of April 1830, he issued an address, suggesting that a subscription should be opened in every county in England, for the purpose of purchasing for him an estate sufficient for the qualification of two members—himself, and another whom he should nominate. The sum required was about L.10,000, which could easily be raised, he thought. 'Two pounds each from every reader of the *Register* would about do the thing. Forbearance from a single glass of grog for one market-day on the part of each farmer would do the thing.' But neither the farmers nor the readers of the *Register* were willing to make such a sacrifice to see him in parliament. The entire sum subscribed in aid of his L.10,000 scheme amounted only to L.27, 2s.—a most lame and impotent conclusion to so grand a project.

The year 1831 was signalised by the trial of Mr Cobbett for the publication of a seditious and malicious libel, tending to excite the agricultural labourers to acts of sedition, insurrection, and arson. The article which had provoked this proceeding on the part of ministers, was one entitled 'The Rural War,' in which he had commented with his usual freedom and boldness on the condition of the peasantry, the alleged circumstances which had led to their present misery, and the best means of relieving it. If Cobbett had had to defend himself against such a government prosecution ten years previously, he would have had little chance of escape; but 1831 was not a favourable year for putting down libellous attacks, nor could the Whigs have committed a greater indiscretion than they did, when they gave their greatest enemy so rare an opportunity of exposing their inconsistency, and of shewing how their professed affection for the liberty of the press had given place to the most arbitrary notions on that head now that they were in office. From the beginning of the trial till its close, the whole proceedings were calculated to furnish Cobbett with new materials for carrying on the war against the Whigs, and he made ample use of them when the trial was over. He defended himself in a most able and eloquent speech of six hours in length. The attorney-general then replied, and after Lord Tenterden had summed up, the jury retired at five minutes past six o'clock. No verdict was given during the night, and at a little before nine in the morning, the jury stated that they could not agree; upon which

they were discharged. The decision of the jury met with general approbation, and from all parties Cobbett received congratulations on his triumph over ministers.

In the autumn of 1832, Mr Cobbett paid a visit to Scotland, where he was welcomed by the Radicals as 'the ablest of writers, the most consummate politician, the fearless and uncompromising advocate of the rights of the people.' During his tour in the north, he published vivid descriptions in the *Register* of what he saw, well calculated to flatter the pride of the people of Scotland, against whom his prejudices had been quite as strong as those of Dr Johnson. In the preface to his *Tour in Scotland*, which he published in the following year, he confesses that though he had never carried his notions of the sterility and worthlessness of Scotland, and of the niggardly character of its inhabitants, so far as many others have, yet he had not been able to prevent himself from imbibing in some degree 'the prejudices which a long train of causes, beginning to operate nearly a thousand years ago, have implanted in the minds of Englishmen;' and as he had allowed those prejudices to slip out now and then throughout his writings, he deemed it his duty to make amends for that injustice by shewing what Scotland really is.

Soon after his return from Scotland, the first general election under the Reform Bill took place, when Mr Cobbett, who had been brought forward as a candidate both at Manchester and Oldham, was returned for the latter borough along with Mr Fielden, by a majority of four to one over their opponents. In Manchester, 1305 electors voted for Mr Cobbett; and the number would have been much greater, in all probability, but for the decision at Oldham, which was known in Manchester by noon on the last polling-day.

The friends and admirers of Mr Cobbett, who had been so anxious to see him in parliament, had now obtained their wish. He was now a portion of the 'collective wisdom;' nor was it long before he took occasion to give the House a sample of his eloquence. In the debate on the choice of a Speaker, on the 31st of January 1833, he delivered his first parliamentary speech, which excited no small amount of good-humoured merriment by the homely, colloquial style in which it was couched, not less than by the originality of his remarks. On the 7th of February, he made a long speech on the moving the address, when he was a good deal annoyed by the usual cries of 'Question, question;' 'Divide, divide,' by which the House signifies that it is tired. He was not the man, however, to be put down by any such demonstrations. He told the disturbers, in a very decided tone, that the division should not take place for a couple of hours at least, unless he were allowed to give the reasons for his vote—a threat which had the intended effect of producing quietness. But although he spoke frequently, and soon made the House familiar with all his notions about the currency, the malt-tax, and taxation generally,

his warmest admirers could not help perceiving that his influence was lessened rather than increased by his return to parliament. In a lecture or a letter to the readers of the *Register*, he could magnify whatever question he took up, so as to make it seem unanswerable for the moment. But he was not fitted for a deliberative assembly like the House of Commons. His age, too, rendered it unlikely that he could adapt himself to the political atmosphere of parliament; nor was it long before his constitution began to shew that it was unfitted to sustain the evil effects of the late hours and bad ventilation of the House.

Prior to his becoming a member of the imperial legislature, Mr Cobbett had no very exalted opinion of the House of Commons, and it is evident that his more familiar acquaintance with 'the finest club in the world,' as it has been styled, did not raise the character of its members in his estimation. The *Weekly Register* is full of the most amusing complaints, regarding the careless, undignified way in which parliament manages the business of the nation. The want of proper accommodation was also a frequent source of grumbling. 'Why,' says the member for Oldham, 'are we squeezed into so small a space, that it is absolutely impossible that there should be calm and regular discussion, even from that circumstance alone? Why do we live in this hubbub? Why are we exposed to all these inconveniences? Why are 658 of us crammed into a space that allows to each of us no more than a foot and a half square, while at the same time, each of the servants of the king, whom *we* pay, has a palace to live in, and more unoccupied space in that palace, than the little *hole* into which we are all crammed, to make the laws by which this great kingdom is governed?' Few persons, he contends, could sit in that place as constantly as he had done, without injuring their health. He had never seen a regiment of soldiers of which the private men could have kept up the regular and constant attendance which he had given, without breaking down. His own power of enduring fatigue and late hours, he ascribes to his simple and temperate habits, never dining out, and having nothing to annoy him, except the very common grievance at that period of too many letters. But it was not the number that annoyed him, so much as the cost of postage, which formed a very heavy tax. 'Twelve letters a day,' he says, 'amount to L.18, 5s. a year, which is as much as is probably necessary to maintain my house one week out of the fifty-two. I need say no more to convince any reasonable man, that all two-penny post letters should come to me post-free.' Some of his correspondents, too, were persons who had no business with him—who wrote merely to obtain his autograph. Others annoyed him by adding '*Esquire*' to his name; a title to which he considered he had no title. The worst evil connected with his parliamentary duties, however, was the necessity of spending so much of his time in the close and heated atmosphere of the House of Commons. In spite of his robust health and

his temperate habits, the hard work at home and long hours in the House were too much for him; and to these causes, doubtless, may be attributed the illness by which he was cut off so suddenly at last.

At the general election which followed the resignation of the Whig ministry in 1834, and the brief return of Sir Robert Peel to Downing Street, Mr Cobbett was again returned for Oldham, and resumed his regular attendance in the House in spite of an inflammatory attack from which he was suffering. When the Marquis of Chandos brought on his motion for the repeal of the malt-tax, Mr Cobbett attempted to speak in favour of it, but, owing to inflammation of the throat, from which he had not recovered, he could not make himself heard. He remained to vote on that occasion, thereby increasing his complaint. It was not till after another instance of the same imprudence, that he felt the serious nature of his illness, and saw the necessity of taking some care of himself. He resolved to go down to his farm near Farnham, and get rid of his hoarseness and inflammation. After a few weeks there, he seemed to have almost recovered his usual health, but he imprudently took tea in the open air, on the evening of Thursday, June 11, and the consequence was a violent relapse of his complaint. With a few fluctuations, he lingered for a week, during which he recovered so far as to be able to talk in the most sprightly manner upon politics and farming, and to express a wish for 'four days' rain for the Cobbett corn and the root crops.'

On the day previous to his death, he could not rest in the house, but insisted on being carried round the farm. The strong man, who had hardly ever known what illness was, seemed as if he would set disease at defiance to the very last. That night he grew more and more feeble—the journey round the farm had been the last flicker in the socket. About one o'clock on Thursday morning, the 18th of June 1835, William Cobbett expired, in the seventy-fourth year of his age.

On the 27th June, the funeral took place from Normandy Farm. The procession was attended by Mr Fielden, M.P., Mr O'Connell, Mr Wakley, and several other members of parliament. By the time it had reached Farnham, it was swelled by thousands of labourers in their smock-frocks and straw-hats, who followed the procession to the church-yard, where the mortal remains of England's greatest self-taught prose writer were deposited beside those of his humble ancestors.

And now, looking back at the forty years of stern battling with abuses which he maintained so resolutely, many persons scruple not to affirm that Cobbett deserves no higher place in history than is given to a Wilkes, a Sacheverel, or any of those other self-exaggerating agitators who have disturbed society at various periods during the last two centuries, and whose names must speedily sink into well-merited oblivion. Those who form such an estimate, however, only shew their ignorance of the man, and of the powerful

influence he exercised on public affairs, more especially during the last twenty or thirty years of his active and laborious life. Without speaking of the many admirable volumes he wrote—the *Advice to Young Men*, the *Rural Rides*, the *Year's Residence in America*, the *Cottage Economy*, the *Tour in Scotland*, the *English Gardener*, the *Woodlands*, almost any one of which would have given him a high place in literature as one of the finest painters of rural life—no one who is familiar with his political writings, and who has paid attention to the gradual progress of the great 'Condition of England Question' since the end of the war, can fail to perceive that William Cobbett did more to awaken public opinion to a sense of its duty towards the poor, gave a more powerful impulse to the movement for bettering the condition of the working-classes, which is rapidly becoming the greatest question of the day, than any writer of the present century. What higher praise could be awarded to a public journalist!